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ABSTRACT

This study compared the perceptions of a national sample of urban, suburban, and rural administrators (N=891, a 72% response) about minority dropout indicators to what current research literature identifies as highly-ranked causal variables related to minority dropout rates. The literature review identified the following causes of dropping out, specifically related to minority students: (1) no hope of graduating; (2) lack of appropriate role models; (3) personal or cultural dehumanization; (4) feelings of discrimination; (5) peer violence; (6) lack of support for education from the cultural community; (7) no peer support to continue in school; and (8) family problems such as divorce, chemical abuse, poverty, or migrant work. The instrument created by Bull, Salyer and Montgomery, contains 42 causal variables, of which 13 relate strongly to minority students. Randomly selected principals and superintendents rated each variable as a national priority for the prevention of dropouts on a Likert-like 5-option scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. An analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to examine a composite of the 13 minority items to the remaining 29 nonminority items. Tukey post hocs revealed that nonminority items outweighed minority items and that suburban administrators supported these items more than rural administrators. One-way ANOVAs revealed that pregnancy, no hope for graduation, poverty, and dehumanization were seen as higher priority items by urban administrators than by rural administrators. The causes that administrators view as being priorities are rooted in the home, in the child, or in the community. (43 references) (KS)

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Minority Dropouts: Do Rural, Urban and Suburban Administrators

Perceive Causes Affecting Minorities as Priority Items?

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MINORITY DROPOUTS:

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RC 018500

Abstract

Leaving school early is occurring at a high rate for students who are ethnically or culturally diverse. Some of the generalized difficulties in schools, at home or with peers that contribute to increased dropout rates for all students appear to particularly affect minority students. This study compared the responses of a national sample of urban, suburban and rural administrators (N=891) to the priority rankings of causal dropout variables related to minorities. Results indicate causal variables related to minorities rate low in priority, particularly for administrators in rural areas. Given the resulting priority rankings, a change in minority dropout status would be slow at best.

MINORITY DROPOUTS:

Do Rural, Urban and Suburban Administrators Perceive Causes Affecting Minorities as Priority Items?

Students choose not to complete high school at an alarming rate. In fact, about 25% of America students fail to complete twelve years of education (Wolman, Bruininks & Thurlow, 1989). A variety of causes have been hypothesized and studied as the reason for such a calamity. Some believe that fault is rooted in the school, others in the parents, or in the peer group or in the children themselves.

There may also be differences between the experiences of rural and urban dropouts. While neither are exempt from the dropout dilemma, Pallas (1987) shows that urban students drop out more frequently than other students. At the same time, it is also estimated that 25% of rural students quit school before graduation (Helge, 1989). Yet, rural educators claim that a rural education is different, better than in the more crowded and congested urban areas, with fewer problems leading students to drop out (Pallas, 1987). Rural educators also cite the seminal study of Barker and Crump (1964) to show that students attending rural schools have more roles to play and therefore more bonding occurs with less alienation and anomie.

Whether the students are in rural or urban settings, minority students are more likely to drop out than are their white, middle class peers. Many minority students believe that they will not complete high school (Hammond & Howard, 1986). This is particularly true of American Indian and Hispanic youth. Many studies show that minority students are proportionally overrepresented in the dropout statistics (California Dropouts, 1986; Center for Education Statistics, 1987; Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack & Rock, 1986; Rumberger, 1987; Stephenson, 1985). In fact, as many as 56% of a school minority population drop out of school before graduation (Hahn, 1987).

The purpose of the present study was to examine the perspectives of administrators concerning the priority of causal variables contributing to minority students dropping out of school. Within school districts nationally, the individuals who can and do establish dropout prevention programs are the administrators. Conventional wisdom would indicate that their views about the priority of causes of dropping out might provide insight into the adoption of future prevention strategies and their impact upon minority student populations. Specifically, the questions posed in this study were:

- (1) Do administrators prioritize causes of dropping out related to minority students as highly as other causes, and
- (2) Does the administrator's rural, urban or suburban location influence the way in which they prioritize dropout causes?

Minority causes for dropping out

A review of the current research literature identified several causes of dropping out which seem to be specifically related to minority students in public education. They include no hope of graduating, lack of appropriate role models, personal or cultural dehumanization, feelings of discrimination, peer violence, lack of support for education from the cultural community, no peer support to continue in school and family problems or situations, such as poverty or migrant work.

No hope of graduating. Students who have little hope of graduating because they have been retained one or more years or because they have failed too many classes are likely dropout candidates (Hess & Lauber, 1985; Ekstrom et al., 1986; Widman & Hoisden, 1988). Numerous reports from minority dense school districts indicate that minority students, such as blacks or Hispanics, are retained more often and fail more classes than their non-minority

counterparts (Fennimore, 1989).

Overall, 18% of students reported in the teacher survey of the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 (Russo, 1988) had repeated one grade and 2% had repeated two or more grades. Those most likely to repeat a grade are of low socioeconomic status, male, black, Hispanic, or American Indian. This fact raises serious questions in the minds of several authors (e.g., Hamilton, 1986; Mizell, 1987). One of the foremost questions is the applicability of raising graduation standards in districts that are concurrently worried about dropouts.

Many practices imposed by school boards and state level mandates seem to lead to the exclusion of minorities by raising standards. In Oklahoma, for example, recent educational reforms have included competency testing for high school graduation, the increase of math, science and social studies requirements and the effects on minorities. Fear of failure can be very influential and pervasive with students. This is particularly related to the impact of competency tests tied to higher standards. Many students fear that they will fail and when they see similar others fail, they do not choose to even try. The result is that they drop out of school (Catterall, 1986).

Competent minority students may not want to be vulnerable. Fear of the results of competency tests has led to court challenges in Florida and in other places where there are significant minority populations (Fisher, 1985). Tests such as competency tests have been used historically to exclude minority members from a variety of positions (Smith, 1988), not just from graduation.

Lack of appropriate role models. Another causal variable for dropping out of minority students is the lack of appropriate role models in the school. Minority students have been shown to drop out because there is no adult of their culture or race in the school to function as a role model (Illinois State Task Force on Hispanic Student Dropouts, 1985). Perhaps this variable affects all students, however, it seems to have a particular impact on students who are in the cultural or ethnic minority.

When there are no role models for students, there is little likelihood that the student will be able to experience a culturally appropriate and often expected process of mentoring. The result is few anchors for the minority student who feels very different in the public school. There may not be someone to take an interest in and to push a student to reach his or her potential (Hammond & Howard, 1986).

Dehumanization. Many black and Hispanic students who have dropped out of school report that they left because of personal and cultural dehumanization or academic humiliation. For example, American Indian students recall being told "look me in the eye!" (Lipinski, 1989). This action in most Indian cultures indicates a lack of respect for the adult. Other students report academic humiliation when being forced to attempt tasks clearly beyond their capabilities in front of their peers. The lack of recognition of cultural or ethnic beliefs as well as personal humiliation often produces a negative psychological reaction within minority students in schools (Smith, 1986).

Discrimination. The level of acceptance by others which a minority student perceives at school can affect his or her choice to stay in school. Many minority students believe they are discriminated against by their teachers (Lipinski, 1989). They report that teachers suspect them when there are problems in class, denigrate them when the opportunity arises and do not allow them the same opportunity as children of the majority culture.

Many schools are sociologically intolerant of student diversity resulting in strong unspoken pressures on students who are different. Of

course these students are likely to drop out. Many school practices and policies in the areas of attendance, academics and behavior relate to stereotypical perceptions of students (Wheelock, 1986). This can lead to increased school leaving on the part of those students who feel discriminated against.

Peer violence. As one reads the news media about the condition of the intercity, it seems that peer violence is another factor affecting students persistence in urban schools. Peer violence keeps many children away from schools, eventually causing them to drop out if they are severely threatened (Perales, 1988). Turf wars, where gangs fight for territory, in urban areas seem to exacerbate this problem.

Interestingly, the high statistics for violent death among teenagers, one indicator of peer violence, are found in intercities alone. In some counties in the west, the violent death rate for young males is 13% higher than it is for intercity youth (Helge, 1989).

Lack of support for education. A lack of support for education by significant others causes many students to lose interest in school (Howell & Freese, 1982; Ekstrom et al., 1986; Fennimore, 1989). The cultural community sets the tone. Certain "communities" or "cultures" do not see the school as the vehicle for success for most of their members. For example, in many traditional Hispanic communities young women are not supported in their educational endeavors because their first occupational position is perceived to be in the home. When the community is non-supportive of education more students drop out (Watt, Guajardo & Markman, 1987). This seem to be particularly true for minority students (Schwaback, 1985).

Children whose families have had bad experiences in education or who have themselves been unsuccessful in school typically are not supportive of the educational process. When the family does not support education the child is more likely to drop out (Barr & Knowles, 1986; Coleman, 1988).

Lack of peer support for education is another variable that feeds into the dropout equation. In schools where students are persisters, there is a nucleus of students who want to go on to school and provide support for others with similar goals. The same force works for many schools where minorities are predominant and most students plan to leave school early. Not only is a visible support group absent, but there is active work against going to school (Schwaback, 1985).

In fact, there may be tremendous social pressure against doing well in school. Many peers of potential dropouts are already dropouts. If these young friends were penniless and had nothing to do they would have little influence on the potential dropout. However, many have money, cars, clothes and other trappings of teenage success. All of these things are acquired after dropping out and may be viewed as a consequence of leaving school. The possibility of having attractive possessions makes dropping out look good to many minority youth, particularly if they tend to be delinquent (Dunham & Alpert, 1987). These peers are considered "system failures" because they show no affiliation to the school and they draw those still in the educational system away from school. This can happen directly through enticement or indirectly through modeling.

Parental problems. Parental problems such as divorce or separation, unemployment or chemical abuse disrupt family life and can reduce a child's stability to the point that school success becomes a meaningless goal. Single parenting problems are more severe in minority families than they are in majority families. A recent Wall Street Journal article states that 50% of black children and 33% of Hispanic children live with single parents as

compared with 19% of white children (Otten, 1990).

Pregnancy. For young women, pregnancy is one of the oft cited causes of dropping out of school (Ediger, 1987; Hartford Public Schools, 1987; Stone, 1985). Hahn (1987) asserts that 80% of girls who become pregnant in high school drop out. In fact, it is the single most common reason for females leaving school.

Dropping out when pregnant can be caused by embarrassment, family pressures or school rules. In some districts, students cannot be in school while visibly pregnant or for some weeks after the baby is born. This usually means that an entire school year is lost (Beck & Muia, 1980; Howell & Freese, 1982; Ekstrom et al., 1986; Pallas, 1987). Typically, schools are reluctant to provide services for young mothers to remain in school. This is particularly true in rural areas (Helge, 1990).

Poverty. Poverty is another factor in lack of school persistence for minority students. Many dropouts report a need to make money or to help out at home as a reason for school leaving (Hartford Public Schools, 1987). Poverty is one of the factors often related to lack of school success (Fennimore, 1989). In rural areas, 30% of the farm population and 24% of the non-farm population live in poverty (Helge, 1990). In fact, people in rural areas are twice as likely to be poor as their non-rural counterparts (National Rural Studies Committees, 1989). And, dropouts are three times as likely to come from welfare families as from families not on welfare (Hahn, 1987).

Member of migrant family. As a member of a migrant family (Morse, 1987), students are at risk for dropping out. Over half of the migrant families are minorities. Their children have sporadic school attendance, tend to be behind in school, do not bond with school and are typically educationally alienated. Typically, migrant families are found in rural areas although some return to large cities when the crop season is completed.

Method

Instrument

The instrument for this study was created by Bull, Salyer and Montgomery (1990). The original scale contained 42 causal variables identified by the literature as dropout indicators. Of this group, 13 relate specifically to minority students and their school persistence.

Each item was presented as a possible cause for dropping out, withdrawing, being removed, or leaving school early as reported in the educational and psychological literature. For clarity, the causal variable was followed with a parenthetical explanation. For example, item 33 read: Discrimination (particularly by teachers against minority students). Participants indicated the rank of each as a national priority for the prevention of dropouts on a Likert-like five option scale ranging from strongly agree (1) to strongly disagree (5).

Subjects

The subjects were randomly selected principals (N=650) and superintendents (N=650) drawn from Patterson's American Education (Moody, 1989). Thirteen-hundred questionnaires were sent out. To improve the return rate, two follow-up mailings were also conducted. From the initial sample, 933 were returned and 891 of these were usable. This yielded a return rate of 71.8%.

The sample contained 752 identifiable males and 119 females. Subjects averaged 10.7 years in administration and 12.3 years in teaching. In terms of education, 417 held BA/BS degrees, 191 held MA/MS/MAT degrees and 245 held specialist or Ph.D./Ed.D. degrees. In terms of location, 398 were from rural schools, 189 from urban schools and 241 from suburban schools. The schools

were reported in terms of socioeconomic status as 19 upper class, 583 middle class and 121 lower class.

Data Analysis

Data analyses were conducted using SYSTAT (Wilkinson, 1987) and SPSS-X (1983) and the default options therein, unless otherwise indicated.

Results

Chi-squares. One-way chi-squares were computed for the thirteen items related specifically to minorities. For ease of presentation, the "agree" and "strongly agree" responses and the "disagree" and "strongly disagree" responses were collapsed. The expected values are 40%, 20% and 40%, by category. Table 1 presents these data.

For the variables related specifically to minorities and in order of agreement, principals and superintendents find the following causes of dropping out to be national priorities:

- (1) 88.8% - Parental problems (divorce, unemployment, separation),
- (2) 86.9% - No hope of graduating (failed too much already, educationally discouraged),
- (3) 79.3% - No parental support for education (active parental pressure against continuing),
- (4) 65.4% - Pregnancy (and no active support to stay in school),
- (5) 65.3% - No peer support for education (active peer pressure against continuing),
- (6) 54.4% - Poverty (e.g., does not dress appropriately -- does not "fit in"),
- (7) 50.4% - Migrant family (missed too much to catch up),
- (8) 48.9% - Failure to pass, or anticipation of failure on, minimum competency tests,
- (9) 46.4% - No community (cultural) support for education,
- (10) 33.6% - Lack of teacher role models (e.g., minorities),
- (11) 30.3% - Personal, cultural and linguistic dehumanization (no multicultural training for teachers),
- (12) 21.5% - Peer violence (perceived lack of safety in school), and
- (13) 17.1% - Discrimination (particularly by teachers against minority students).

Composite analysis of variance. An analysis of variance was used to examine a composite of the 13 minority items listed above to the remaining 29 non-minority items on the original scale. This was done to determine if causes specifically related to minorities were weighted as heavily as those related to other areas. Only significant main effects were found. Tukey post hocs revealed that non-minority items outweighed minority items and suburban administrators more than rural supported these items. Table 2 contains the summary analysis of variance table.

Individual analyses of variance. In addition to the overall test of the composites, individual one-way ANOVAs were conducted for each of the minority items by location. These tests indicated that seven of the minority causal variables had significant differences between urban, rural and suburban administrator district location responses. Specifically, the variables of pregnancy, no hope for graduation, poverty and dehumanization were seen as higher priority items for urban administrators than for rural administrators. Only one variable, no parental support for education, was a higher priority for urban administrators than for suburban administrators. And, lack of teacher role models and peer violence were higher priority items for urban administration than for both rural and suburban administrators. All significant analyses included significant Tukey post hocs. Table 3 reports

these results.

Discussion

The results speak to a clear pattern taken by administrators. Their perceptions reveal an avoidance of responsibility for the dropout problem. The causes that administrators view as being priorities are rooted in the home, in the child or in the community. There is little agreement that administrators are interested in or see a need for dealing with school related items such as discrimination, dehumanization and violence. These very areas of less concern are an echo of what black, Hispanic and American Indian critics of the schools have noted for a long time.

The implications of these data could be that administrators do not agree with or understand the complaints of minorities or that they feel these complaints, which are fairly well substantiated in the literature, are not valid. It might also be that administrators are not cognizant of causes of dropping out which relate specifically to minorities and which could successfully be addressed in the public schools.

The means analyses indicate that urban administrators hold variables directly related to the retention of minority students in school as a higher priority than do suburban administrators. It is possible that urban administrators are more sensitized to the needs of minority students, it is also possible that these factors are more important in their districts because they affect the full range of student types in urban schools.

Those educators interested in working on the problems of minority dropout would be well served by the dissemination of the needs of minorities to the administration cadre. The focus of this dissemination should be on the specific needs of minority students. It is little wonder that the causes for dropping out affecting minority students are not dealt with if administrators generally do not know about them or hold them as high priorities.

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Table 1

Chi-Square Analyses of responses to the question: Should this cause of dropping out be a national priority?

Item	Expected value	% Agreement	Cases (40)	(20)	(40)	N	Chi-Square
Pregnancy		65.4	555	69	225	849	235.13
No peer support for education		65.3	556	115	180	851	230.04
No parental support for education		79.3	680	53	124	857	553.13
No community support for education		46.4	395	106	350	851	33.25
No hope of graduation		86.9	740	33	79	852	779.51
Being a member of a migrant family		50.4	425	286	150	843	185.39
Poverty		54.4	464	145	240	853	75.73
Lack of teacher role models		33.6	285	168	395	848	17.86
Peer violence		21.5	181	145	517	843	171.53
Discrimination		17.1	145	149	555	849	250.68
No multicultural training		30.3	257	217	375	849	36.90
Fail minimum competency test		48.9	415	177	256	848	37.67
Parental problems		88.8	755	37	55	850	844.49

Table 2

Analysis of Variance of Minority Items Against Non-Minority Items by
Rural, Urban and Suburban Location Summary Table

Source	df	Sum of Squares	Mean Squares	F Ratio	Prob
Location	2	14.62	7.309	36.32	.000*
Items	1	6.27	6.265	22.56	.000*
Location by Class	2	.39	.195	.703	.492
Error	1635	454.126	.278		

* Significant < .05

Tukey Post Hocs (alpha = .05)

Location:	Rural	Suburban	Urban
Means	2.649	2.734	2.703

Suburban > Rural (p < .05)

Items:	Minority	Not Minority
Means	2.608	2.760

Non-minority > Minority (p < .05)

Table 3

Significant Analyses of Variance Comparisons by Location* of Responses to the Question: Should this possible cause of dropping out be a national priority?

Item	U/S	U/R	S/U	S/R	R/U	R/S**
Pregnancy		X				
No hope for graduation		X				
Poverty		X				
Dehumanization		X				
No parental support for education	X					
Lack of teacher role models	X	X				
Peer violence	X	X				

* Significant comparisons also had significant Tukey post hocs.

**	U/S = Urban > Suburban	S/R = Suburban > Rural
	U/R = Urban > Rural	R/U = Rural > Urban
	S/U = Suburban > Urban	R/S = Rural > Suburban